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Roberto Ramón Lint Sagarena's Aztlán and Arcadia: Religion, Ethnicity, and the Creation of Place

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# REVIEWS



AZTLÁN AND ARCADIA: RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND THE CREATION OF PLACE.  
By Roberto Ramón Lint Sagarena. New York: New York University  
Press, 2014. 223 pp. ISBN 978-1479850648

In *Aztlán and Arcadia*, Roberto Ramón Lint Sagarena analyzes identity-formation processes that took place in California during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, specifically the distinct identities that emerged from California's Spanish and Mexican past. Lint Sagarena demonstrates how different groups cultivated an identity out of a shared Spanish/Mexican past in the region after the 1848 U.S. conquest and points to the divergent pathways those historical identities have taken. For Anglo Americans, California's Spanish past allowed the post-1848 U.S. socio-cultural and political structure to lay a historical claim to the region by stressing the continuation of allegedly enlightened European-American rule between the Spanish and U.S. regimes while downplaying the Mexican period. According to Lint Sagarena, the Spanish Franciscan missionaries in old Alta California represented the first white men in the region, and thus, for Anglos, gave commemoration of their work relevance. In time the celebration of the Spanish legacy in California took an almost legendary character, inspiring a shared collective identity among twentieth century Californians as seen in many literary works and in architectural designs (e.g., Spanish colonial revival style buildings). California's Mexican past was denigrated by many Anglo Californians, but Lint Sagarena points to how the Chicano movement of the 1960s helped bring Mexican *indigenismo* to the forefront of Mexican Americans' self-identity. The spirit of Aztlán shaped a collective identity among Mexican-heritage youth and helped inspire literature and art (namely murals) throughout Southern California. The pathways of the two intertwined historical legacies took different directions, but Lint Sagarena argues they both served to create cultural unity through their spiritual groundings.

Lint Sagarena begins his analysis by tracing the roots of the Spanish fantasy heritage as an architectural and cultural commodity in Southern California. Although the area now considered the U.S. state of California was first colonized in 1769 by Spain and then by Mexico from 1821-1848, different groups emphasized or understated particular aspects of the past for their own identity-making purposes. Focusing specifically on Southern California, Lint Sagarena asserts that the founding of California's famed Franciscan missions provided the region with a distinctive colonial identity that allowed white U.S. civic leaders and

local economic developers to claim a past in this recently conquered territory. If the Spanish friars at the various 21 missions along the coast represented the region's initial civilizers (i.e., white/European colonizers) then from that point of view the U.S. conquest of California was justified in the sense that the new colonizers were picking up where the old left off. In contrast, the mestizo background of pueblo colonists in San José and Los Angeles (as well as the presence of presidio soldiers throughout Alta California) was ignored by many practitioners of the Spanish Fantasy Past.

Mexican rule, particularly the secularization of the missions, was portrayed by many Anglo Californians (and even a few upper class *californios*) as a dark age of bad governance; if California was being ruined in such a way, how could the U.S. not take the lead and finish the civilizing work of Franciscan friars like Junípero Serra? Lint Sagarena explores how this Hispanophilia—a growing romanticism for the imagined bucolic, easier days of yore in Spanish California—developed to the point that it inspired literary works and architecture like San Diego's Balboa Park which sought to reclaim the region's Spanish history. Scholars interested in the Spanish fantasy heritage in California and elsewhere in the Southwest are aware of the numerous books which have probed this topic as a means of encouraging economic development of the region, but Lint Sagarena's main intervention into this Hispanophilia discourse rests in his analysis of the missions' fate after the U.S. conquest. Indeed, the preservation of the missions and commemoration of their founders during a time when anti-Catholicism was rampant in the U.S. are points emphasized in the book.

The author focuses much attention on how the missions were staffed by Spanish and other European clergy after the missions were incorporated into the various Catholic dioceses in California. Many nostalgic *californios*, such as José de la Guerra y Noriega of Santa Bárbara, urged that new priests assigned to the missions be Spanish rather than Mexican priests; Lint Sagarena synthesizes this desire as being symbolic “of the gulf that existed between the American and Mexican Catholic churches at the time” (31). Furthermore, Lint Sagarena uses the binational legal dispute over the Pious Fund (an endowment the Mexican government owed the California missions) to illustrate his point that California's past was framed by Anglo Americans' discourses of a wise, romantic Spanish colonialism which was abruptly ended by Mexican decadence and misrule.

The section focused on Aztlán has less material and analysis than the detailed discussion of the Spanish fantasy past, nevertheless Lint Sagarena

traces how the Aztlán concept acted as another sort of fantasy past for actual Spanish-heritage individuals throughout the U.S.–Mexican borderlands, namely the Chicano activist generation of the 1960s and 1970s. If the missions were the focal point for Californian Hispanophiles of the late 1800s, then Our Lady of Guadalupe (a symbol of indigenous/mestizo Mexican culture) was the focus of Chicano expressionism anchored on the Aztlán viewpoint. Lint Sagarena asserts that intellectuals such as Alurista and Corky Gonzalez used the notion of Aztlán as a way to help build a common identity among a people who sought to forge a politicized identity that could bridge their realities in the U.S. with their Mexican heritage. Against the “heavy veil of the ‘Fantasy Heritage,’” Lint Sagarena writes, “young politicized Mexicans would create a countering heritage employing the racial logic and vocabulary of *indigenismo*, religious emblems of cultural hybridity, as well as strategies gained from the experience of subaltern life in the United States” (134–135). Mexican Americans used Aztlán as symbol of political unity and mobilization. Moreover, Lint Sagarena explains how the Mexican *indigenista* past provided unity among Latinos and how the Catholic Diocese of Los Angeles began incorporating Chicano murals and indigenous symbols at its churches.

*Aztlán and Arcadia* is an engaging read and contributes to the fields of religious studies, Latinos studies, American studies, and California history. This book may have been stronger with a longer analysis of how Chicanos celebrated and articulated their indigenous religious heritage outside of the Catholic Church (including more analysis of spiritual symbolism in secular settings beyond murals). Additionally, a discussion of whether Aztlán and the Spanish Fantasy Heritage are mutually exclusive or hybridical for Chicanos and other Latinos would have furthered Lint Sagarena’s analysis. Nonetheless, *Aztlán and Arcadia* is a noteworthy contribution to our understanding of California/Mexican American history by focusing our attention to the area’s religious past. As a topic long avoided by many Chicano scholars, religious history in the community remains a rather untapped space that merits further attention as a means of better appreciating the worldviews and faiths that contributed to the formation of identity among Mexican-ancestry individuals in Southern California and throughout the U.S.–Mexican borderlands. This book is highly recommended for its analysis of how conquered and conquerors negotiated their past in California by crafting the past according to their own political and spiritual designs.

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